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THE LBJ TAPES

By Fred T. Newcomb and Larry Haapanen

Fred T. Newcomb of Van Nuys, California, an advertising art director, is co-author with Perry Adams, of a privately printed book on the Kennedy assassination entitled "Murder From Within".

Larry Haapanen holds a Ph.D from Washington State University, and is presently teaching in Rockaway, Oregon.

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Somewhere in government files is a tape recording of much greater historical importance than any of the so-called "Watergate tapes" that helped force the resignation of President Nixon. Instead of centering around a bungled burglary, these tapes contain conversations between high government officials immediately after the assassination of President Kennedy, as his successor, Lyndon Johnson, assumed the responsibilities and authority of the Presidency.

The existence of the "LBJ tapes" remained a closely held secret until April 21, 1964, when author William Manchester learned of them while conducting interviews for his book, Death of a President. Manchester found that President Kennedy had ordered the Signal Corps to record all communications to and from Air Force One whenever the presidential party was aboard, and that then-Vice President Johnson had been unaware of the order. Manchester then requested White House permission to obtain a complete transcript, which ^{HE} wished to include as an appendix to his book. President Johnson initially refused his request, but eventually, perhaps because the book had the backing of the Kennedy family, Manchester was allowed to read an edited transcript at the White House on May 5, 1965. "Doubtless," Manchester wrote in his book, "the tape will be available to future historians." ¹

But since security was not an issue, why was it necessary to edit the transcript before it was shown to Manchester? Perhaps because the principals didn't know they were being recorded on orders of a man who by then lay in a casket in the back of Air Force One. As the tape reels turned on November 22,

1963, they captured radio traffic between Air Force One (flying from Dallas to Andrews Air Force Base in Washington), ^{the cabinet plane} ~~another presidential jet~~ (over the mid-Pacific carrying half the Kennedy cabinet toward a conference in Tokyo) and the White House Situation Room. (See Figure 1.) As fearful and distraught men sought to keep themselves and the republic together at a most delicate moment in history, they spoke without knowing their conversations were being recorded for posterity.

Another (or possibly the same) transcript was made available to Pierre Salinger, JFK's former press secretary, to assist him in writing With Kennedy. In 1967, Philadelphia attorney Vincent Salandria learned from Salinger that his copy, originally provided by the White House Communications Agency, had been sent among some personal papers to the National Archives.² When the National Archives could locate neither the tape nor the transcript, Salandria appealed directly to the White House Communications Agency. Colonel James U. Cross, military aide to President Johnson and former Air Force One pilot (and later executive director the the LBJ State Park in Stonewall, Texas) replied for the agency: "Logs and tapes of the radio transmissions of military aircraft, including those of Air Force One, are kept for official use only. These tapes are not releasable, nor are they obtainable from commercial sources."³

In 1974, Fred Newcomb took up Salandria's cause. If Manchester and Salinger could gain access to the elusive transcript, he reasoned, how could the government turn down ^{another} private citizen? Repeated inquiries of the National Archives and the presidential libraries (and finally, legal threats) produced an edited copy of the transcript from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas. According to library director Harry J. Middleton, "This xerox copy came to us from the White House in

a group of miscellaneous papers."⁴ There was nothing to indicate when it was prepared, by whom, or for what reason, and nothing to identify it as the transcript used by Manchester or Salinger.

There are a number of historical questions the original tapes or a complete transcript might clarify. This edited transcript, however, raises more questions than it answers. For instance, among students of the Kennedy assassination there has been cynical curiosity about the selection of the Bethesda, Maryland Naval Hospital over Walter Reed Army Hospital and Parkland Hospital in Dallas. One reason has been that the autopsy performed there is so fraught with unexplained conflicts and secrecy that it qualifies as a major scandal of the Warren Report. Another is the fact that but a few hours earlier in Parkland Hospital there had been a nearly violent confrontation between Dr. Earl Rose, Dallas County Medical Examiner, and certain members of the official party when Dr. Rose had tried to detain the body in Dallas for the autopsy required by Texas Law.⁵ As Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry described it, "They more or less snatched that body away from him."⁶

The Manchester account--which supposedly drew on this same transcript--satisfied most of that curiosity. He reported that Rear Admiral George Burkley (personal physician to JFK, and later to LBJ) had proposed Bethesda to Mrs. Kennedy; she had consented; and Brigadier General Godfrey McHugh, JFK's Air Force aide, had alerted Washington to send an ambulance to Andrews. This last conversation was described in detail.⁷

But in the Newcomb transcript we find this three-way exchange between Army Surgeon General Leonard Heaton in Washington and Major General Chester V. Clifton (JFK's military aide) and Dr. Burkley aboard Air Force One:

BURKLEY: General Heaton, this is Admiral Burkley. Did you contact MDW in regards to taking care of the remains of President Kennedy taking him directly to Walter Reed? Probably Mrs. Kennedy will also be going out there. We will clarify that later.

HEATON: All right.

BURKLEY: Just a minute. General Clifton is here.

CLIFTON: This is General Clifton. We do not want a helicopter to go to Bethesda Medical Center. We do want an ambulance and a ground return from Andrews to Walter Reed, and we want the regular post-mortem that has to be done by law under guard performed at Walter Reed. Is that clear?

HEATON: That is clear, General Clifton. 8

Yet in the very next conversation we find General Clifton talking to Gerry Behn, head of the White House Secret Service Detail. He begins:

CLIFTON: This is Clifton. I understand that you have arranged for an ambulance to take President Kennedy to Bethesda. Is this correct?

BEHN: It has been arranged to helicopter the body to Bethesda.

CLIFTON: Okay, if it isn't too dark. 9

The exchange indicates a mutual awareness that Clifton's order to go to Walter Reed has been authoritively countermanded during flight. Though the order may have come from McHugh as Manchester states, its omission in transcript tends to renew old speculations.

There is reason to believe the Newcomb copy differs from others: the transcript shown to Manchester apparently did not include a conversation between Behn and Agent Kellerman that took place while Air Force One was parked in Dallas, prior to President Johnson's taking the oath of office. Had he seen it, it is unlikely he would have written that taping did not begin until the plane was airborne. 10

Other in-flight conversations recounted by Manchester (whether from his transcript or his interviews is unclear) include calls from LBJ aide Bill Moyers and from Secret Service Agents Clint Hill and Lem Johns to the White House, and calls from Congressmen Albert Thomas and Jack Brooks to their offices. 11 None of these appear on the Newcomb transcript.

The Newcomb transcript does, however, include communications with the cabinet plane, implying that the same tapes monitored both aircraft. If this is true, then it is obvious from the conversation (the White House is reading from ^{A 12:46 BULLETIN ON} the AP ticker) ^{10 MIN. AFTER THE SHOOTING} that still more conversations are missing.¹² We know that LBJ had used the Air Force One communications system from Love Field to talk to his aide Walter Jenkins and to JFK advisor McGeorge Bundy in the White House, and to speak twice to Robert Kennedy in Virginia (the text of these calls is an unresolved dispute). Local calls were also placed to Dallas lawyers J. W. (Waddy) Bullion and Irving Goldberg, and to Judge Sarah Hughes and U.S. Attorney H. Barefoot Sanders.¹³ These too, are missing.

It invokes a twinge of bitter humor to find among the remnant conversations an unsigned footnote which reads,

(Note:) The next part of the tape is traffic between SAM COMMAND POST and AF-1 advising them of weather conditions--tornadoes in AF-1's immediate flight path. I'm not putting in this traffic but I do have it in my draft if you want it.¹⁴

So far, the omissions are of doubtful importance--unlikely to yield anything more than firecracker surprises. But among the missing is at least one conversation of nuclear potential. According to Manchester, General Clifton talked to McGeorge Bundy, "asking again [!] whether an international plot was emerging" in the wake of the assassination.¹⁵ Author Jim Bishop, in The Day Kennedy Was Shot, wrote, "It seemed that he [LBJ] was phoning McGeorge Bundy in the White House Situation Room every few minutes."¹⁶ Johnson, who first raised the question of conspiracy during the lifesaving efforts at Parkland Hospital, is also alleged by Manchester to have requested a briefing from CIA Director John McCone.¹⁷ The Newcomb transcript yields only one Clifton-Bundy exchange; and only three lines from Lyndon Johnson (to Rose Kennedy and Nellie Connally); and no mention in any conversation of conspiracy, of an international plot, or of the CIA.¹⁸

If it were not for Theodore H. White, the story would end here--Manchester's reputation stalled against the anonymity of the transcriber/editor. In The Making Of The President 1964, White wrote "On the flight [from Dallas] the party learned that there was no conspiracy; learned of the identity of Oswald and his arrest; and the President's mind turned to the duties of consoling the stricken and guiding the quick." ¹⁷ It was so peripheral to the drama White was presenting that its inclusion in his narrative seems almost accidental. Even now, its significance is not readily apparent. Yet if it is true, it will rank as one of history's most electrifying revelations. Let's restore the perspective of the afternoon of November 22nd, 1963.

* When the plane touched down in Washington at 4:59 P.M. (C.S.T.) it had been less than 3 hours since Oswald had arrived at Police Headquarters.

* There was no firm--or even apparent--link between the crime for which he had been arrested (the shooting of Patrolman J. D. Tippit in Oak Cliff) and the assassination of President Kennedy across the river in Dallas.

* The rifle had not been traced, there were no handprints, no bullets, no incriminating photos nor line-up identifications at that hour to connect Oswald (or anyone else) with the assassination.

* But for those who could imagine such a connection, it would have been difficult to dismiss conspiracy. Oswald's name was first announced at 3:23 P.M.; his Russia visit and his involvement in the Fair Play For Cuba Committee were announced at 3:26 P.M. ²⁰

* It was 1:35 A.M. the next morning before the Dallas Police felt secure enough of their suspect to charge him with the President's murder. ²¹

* As late as 10:45 P.M., Police were still reported to be questioning other employees of the Texas School Book Depository. ²²

* On the afternoon of the following day, Police were still looking

for a negro suspect who was believed to have driven Oswald from the crime scene. ²³

* While the plane was aloft, at least one other man (Donald W. House ~~of Fort Worth~~) was being detained as a suspect assassin. ²⁴

* The American military had been put on global alert. ²⁵

* Pennsylvania troopers had thrown a guard around former President Eisenhower's Gettysburg farm. ²⁶

* The CIA watch committee had been activated. ²⁷

* The government of West Germany was bracing for a possible invasion. ²⁸

Within the time frame of the historical flight, strong suspicions of conspiracy were emerging and none had yet been laid to rest.

But aboard the presidential plane, according to White, people are being told not only that Oswald was the assassin, but that he acted alone! The implications stagger the senses. These same central conclusions which the Warren Commission would labor to bring forth by September of the next year are seen in full dress rehearsal aboard the presidential jet less than four hours after last rites were given the late President--now lying in a bronze coffin in the back of the plane.

This is obviously not the sort of allegation to be hung on a broadcast transcript of unknown origin: it challenges our whole vision of American reality. When something like this turns up, it must be a mistake. Perhaps Theodore White's Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism lapsed as he wrote this account. No one else's account confirms it.

There is a tape-recording in the archives of the government which best recaptures the sound of the hours as it waited for leadership. It is a recording of all the conversations in the air, monitored by the Signal Corps Midwestern center "Liberty," between Air Force One in Dallas, the Cabinet plane over the Pacific, the Joint Chiefs communication center and the White House communications center in Washington. The voices are superbly flat; calm; controlled. One hears the directions of "Front Office" (the President) relayed to "Carpet" (the White House) and to the cabinet above the Pacific... It is a meshing of emotionless voices in the air, performing with mechanical perfection. Only once does any voice break into a sob...²⁹
(emphasis added)

When asked by Vince Salandria for the source of his news denying conspiracy, White wrote back describing this same tape.³⁰ Perhaps it is better that the tape has vanished. If someone talking to the presidential plane knew the outcome of this investigation before it began, how many on the plane knew it, too?

What if we were to assume the worst here: that the primary beneficiary of the assassination, the former vice-president, was somehow involved in a plot to promote himself? After all, it is a matter of public record that the office did fall vacant on his home turf, and that the fatal trip had been made at his behest to mend his political fences.

It becomes obvious now to see how such a tape could be loaded with incriminating conversations; how the tape (and later the transcript) could disappear from the archives after Mr. White has revealed it; and why subsequent researchers would have to lobby and threaten to get even a severely edited transcript. There are at least 25 reported conversations missing from the Newscomb edition -- who knows how many unknown.

But if the transcript were edited to conceal links between the former Vice President and the murder, our conjectures seem doomed by another exchange retained in the Newcomb transcript.

BEHN: Yes, go ahead.

KELLERMAN: I'll have to call you back. Get a couple of men, rather the Volunteer [LBJ] boys to go over his car and so forth. We'll also need hers and several others. ³²

The presidential limousine was a mobile murder scene. Its internal ravages--bullet holes, blood spray, embedded bullet fragments --would be crucial evidence in determining the source of the gunfire. Here is Roy Kellerman (Secret Service Agent in Charge of the Dallas trip) ordering [!] his superior to have men--LBJ's men--go over the car "and so forth." If there were no controversy about the source of the shots, these speculations would be pointless. But so many things do conflict with the official notion of Oswald firing down from the sixth floor window: the Zapruder movie shows JFK thrown violently backward (toward Oswald); the shots seem to come too fast for Oswald's ~~rifle~~ ^{rifle}; gunpowder odors are smelled in the motorcade; the Parkland doctors describe frontal entrance wounds, etc. Since there are few likely sources of shooting in Dealey Plaza which would not have ripped up the innards of the limousine, this car was obviously hot evidence. Yet the LBJ "boys" who went over it that night produced neither bullet holes nor any description of blood/^{SPRAY}pattern (the blood was washed out at Parkland by Secret Servicemen, according to hospital employees). ³³ Only a skull fragment, a cracked windshield, and five bullet fragments were found. ³⁴ It will surprise no one that two larger fragments, with parts of copper jacketing still about them, were later matched to the ³⁵ rifle found on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, and which was later traced to Oswald. But it may surprise some that

all were lying loose on the seats and floor of the car.

To put this in perspective, let us digress. Several hours before these discoveries, Secret Service Agent Richard Johnsen announced another. He turned over to James J. Rowley, Chief of the Secret Service, a nearly unblemished copper-jacketed bullet given him by a hospital employee at Parkland, where it had been found on a stretcher.³⁶ This became Warren Commission Exhibit 399, the famous "magic" bullet later credited seven wounds and two broken bones.³⁷ Like the limousine fragments, it was matched to Oswald's rifle.³⁸ Johnsen apparently told no one of his bullet (no one on Air Force One seems to have heard about it) until he returned to the White House, and then both he and Chief Rowley broke the chain of evidence by not inscribing it, as standard police procedure requires.

This is not the place to evaluate the controversy about the "single bullet theory" or CE399. But because LBJ's "boys" were sent to "go over" the limousine, and because they found fragments of a copper-jacketed bullet, we should note that all ballistics evidence linking Oswald to the assassination passes through a single agency. The doctors at Parkland found only lead particles in Governor Connally,³⁹ as did the autopsy pathologists at Bethesda ~~found only lead particles~~ in President Kennedy.⁴⁰ A bullet impression found on a curb near the shooting was also leaden.⁴¹ In fact, no copper jacketing was found embedded anywhere. It was all found lying loose, and it was all produced by LBJ's "boys".

Barely three weeks after the shooting, UPI found that the limousine had been quietly shipped to the Ford Motor Company in Dear-

born, Michigan to be bullet-proofed and completely refitted.⁴² One wonders why LBJ--who so loved the status symbols of office--wanted to ride about in this same car with its bitter (or at least bittersweet) memories. If this was some macabre gesture of economy, it was most unfortunate since it prevented the Warren Commission from making its own examination and using the car in its filmed re-enactments. Only the bullet-scarred windshield (scarred with lead, not copper) was saved for the Commission and there is both photographic and testimonial evidence to suggest it was not the same one that went to Dallas.

But enough. Asking questions about the Warren Commission, the evidence, the meanings of it all, is like punching the Tarbaby of the Uncle Remus tale. Let's end the speculations.

What we have here is a tape--a tape originally made without the knowledge of those being recorded; belatedly discovered; and eventually released by a President in edited form. The trail of discovery beckons analogy to the Watergate tapes. The existence of the tape is at least established, and if it does not turn up, or is not released to the American public, the mystery of its unavailability will surely darken.

(follow with text of LBJ transcript)

CITATIONS

1. William Manchester, The Death of a President (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) p. 371n.
2. Letter from Pierre Salinger to Vincent Salandria, 12/25/67.
3. Letter from Colonel James U. Cross to Vincent Salandria, 1/2/68.
4. Letter from Harry J. Middleton to Fred T. Newcomb, 5/16/75.
5. Manchester, p. 302-305.
6. Telephone Interview, April 1971.
7. Manchester, p. 349-350.
8. Transcript.
9. Transcript.
10. Manchester, p. 371n, 268.
11. Manchester, p. 341.
12. Transcript.
13. Manchester, p. 268-272.
14. Transcript.
15. Manchester, p. 342.
16. Jim Bishop, The Day Kennedy Was Shot (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968) p. 273.
17. Manchester, p. 346.
18. Transcript.
19. Theodore H. White, The Making of the President 1964 (New York: Signet Books, 1965) paperback edition p. 48.
20. Manchester, p. 284.
21. Bishop, p. 505.
22. There Was A President (National Broadcasting Co. 1966) p. 20.
23. Warren Commission's evidence, Vol. #24, p. 765.
24. NBC-TV Broadcast, 2:45 P.M. (C.S.T.) Nov. 22, 1963.
25. White, p. 20.
26. White, p. 20.
27. Manchester, p. 253, 369.
28. Bishop, p. 285; There Was a President, NBC, p. 30

29. White, p. 20, 21.
30. Note from Theodore White to Vincent Salandria, undated.
31. Telephone interview, October 17, 1975.
32. Transcript.
33. Joe L. Richards, Warren Commission Hearings, Vol. #21, p. 226, ibid, Vol. #21, p. 217.
34. Warren Commission Exhibits NO. 841, 843.
35. Warren Commission Document NO. 5, p. 163.
36. Report of Secret Service Agent Richard E. Johnsen, Commission Document NO. 3; Testimony of Roy Kellerman, Warren Commission Hearings, Vol. #2, p. 99.
37. Warren Report, p. 104, New York Times Ed., P.B.
38. Warren Commission Document NO. 5, p. 163.
39. Testimony of Robert A. Frazier, Warren Commission Hearings, Vol. #5, p. 72.
40. Ibid., p. 73.
41. Ibid, Vol. #15, p. 700, Testimony of Lyndal L. Shaneyfelt.
42. New York Times, December 17, 1963.

For Sylvia

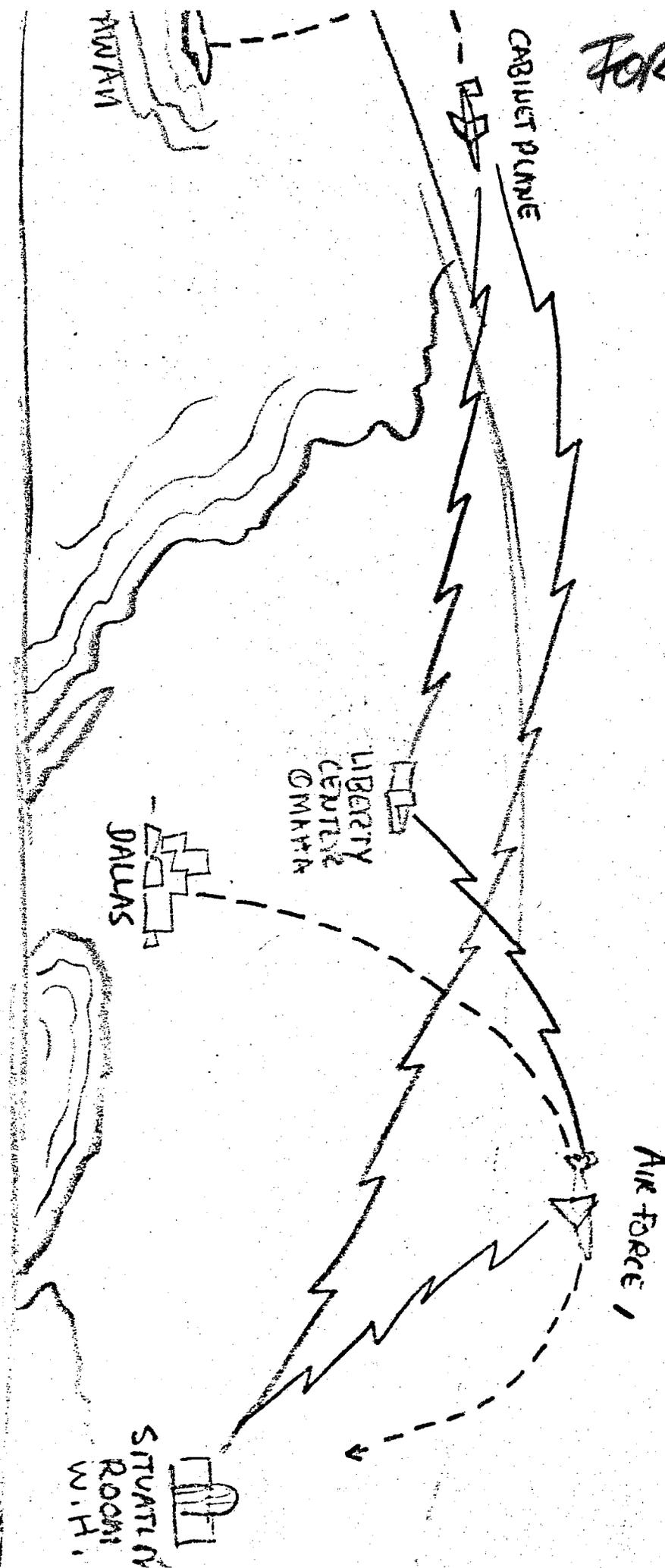


FIG. 1